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WON2 DM122A9 HT

What Kind of Summit Probe?

Fulbright Will Try to Bring Out Facts Without Inflaming Partisan Argument

A man named William Fulbright is perched now on a high and swaying wire as the Senate inquires into the collapse of the summit conference.

As chairman of the investigating group, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Fulbright carries responsibilities of a weight not carried by a Senator within a decade. The last parallel case to the job he confronts was in 1950 when another Senate committee headed by Senator Richard B. Russell of Georgia conducted an inquest on President Truman's recall of Gen. Douglas MacArthur from command in the Korean War.

Fulbright himself sees his mission as to bring out the facts about the abortive summit but not to bring them out in such a way as further to divide the country or to inflame an already harsh partisan argument.

His committee's investigation, however, will test more than whether he can prevail in this hope. It will also test whether the right to know can be upheld without serious injury to national interest and without making the committee room a launching pad for rival presidential candidacies.

It is not altogether a coincidence that this investigation, like the one in the MacArthur issue, is headed by a Southerner. Rightly or

wrongly, the Southerners control all the Senate's inner processes—and set all its inner tone.

There may be many occasions when this circumstance is a bad thing. In the present set of facts it can only be described as a very good thing. The country's purposes would surely not be served by a slashing, headline-happy inquiry into this affair.

And Southerner Fulbright—like Southerner Russell before him—can be depended on not to run that sort of a show. He is actually more concerned with doing this thing properly than doing it for political gain. It is not, of course, that he is especially noble. It is mainly that, coming from a one-party State, he is able to enjoy the luxury of operating an inquiry that will neither make nor break him politically. So, in this sense, he can put politics entirely aside.

Many bad things have been said about the process of investigation in the Senate, and some of those bad things have been justified. But this investigation is likely to show the Senate in its best rather than its worst light as an agency of inquiry. It is going to pin down whatever this Government did—in the "spy plane" episode—which may have been foolish or harmful. But it is not—if Fulbright is able to have his

way—going to become a mere sounding board for extravagant charges or extravagant counter-charges.

For the Foreign Relations Committee, the most distinguished panel in all of Congress, really does, most of the time and on the whole, forget all about small partisanship. It operates on a bipartisan basis far more often than not. And it takes seriously its obligation to sit in review on the foreign policy of the United States.

If such an agency did not exist it would have to be invented. And Fulbright's chairmanship of it is one good practical argument for the seniority system by which the Southerners are able to hold so many powerful places in the Senate. They have, singly and collectively, many faults. But one fault they do not have, either singly or collectively: They do not operate in an irresponsible way in matters involving this country abroad. For them, politics really does stop at the ocean's edge.

